

## 1. Overture

This is the story of how I learnt to be a liar.

Back in my own schooldays, I can remember Mrs FitzSimons setting up this mega-debate in Biology class over 'genes versus environment'. You know, *which is the stronger, nature or nurture?* She was being a bit daring- it was a pretty radical approach back then- and she didn't quite have the format under control. We argued for days, every lesson, till it started to look like we'd outlast the voyage of the Beagle. In the end, I got sent out for standing on the desk and shouting that they were all bull artists to generalise like that- that it's 50% each way for most people and totally unpredictable for the rest. Mrs Fitz told me I was confusing Science and the Humanities as usual, and gave me a detention. After that she drew the line and went on to the next topic before we failed the yearly exams. People who got emotional always made her uncomfortable.

Well, I'm still emotional, god knows- but when it comes to evolution, I know better now. This book is the ultimate rebuttal of my own argument, my belated contribution to Darwinian theory. Environment wins. Hands down. If it could beat me, it could beat anything.

You see, telling the truth is a disease I was born with. I reckon it's locked into one of my chromosomes, an odd recessive trait like green eyes.

(*Green eyes?* Jesus. Where did that come from, already? Five minutes' break there while I pull myself back together.)

(Try again.)

You see, telling the truth is a disease I was born with. It's locked into one of my chromosomes, an odd recessive trait like- god, I don't know, like red hair. Some strange inheritance from a long-dead ancestor, a compulsion to be honest that popped up in my father and then again in me. Or maybe it's a mutation, a fault. Some sort of moral albinism. Whatever. (Quick, let me get out of this paragraph before I get into any more trouble.)

Anyway, it's in my blood. Mum used to dine out on the tale of me getting into strife at preschool when I was only three, after some minor brawl; apparently I came straight out and told the teacher I'd hit Miriam Zammit first. "Claire never tells lies," she'd say proudly to anyone who'd listen. Dad would look at her oddly then, as if to say *of course not*. I don't think it ever occurred to him that he could spawn a liar. He was born with the same quirk, the allergy to bullshit, that dogged drive to get to the bottom of things.

So of course it was nurtured too. I figured out pretty early on that I could talk my way out of anything with Dad, as long as I gave him the *why* with no holds barred and didn't pretend. It didn't work the day I ran across the road to get to the icecream van, of course. My backside still stings thinking about that one. But that was an aberration. *Everything happens for a reason*, he'd say, and so I'd give him the reasons for my sin of the day, from the safety of his arms. Even if I'd done something that made him ropeable, he'd hug me first. *Come here*, he'd say; and then he'd listen, and then he'd give me *his* side.

*-Think about it, Claire*, he'd say in the end.

Yup, I thought that's how things worked; you call it as you see it, explain the World According to Claire, and the other person gives you their truth in return. All perfectly democratic. If sometimes uncomfortable; I remember once I called him a hypocrite after he came down on me like a ton of bricks for being unreasonable. He was *constantly* making excuses for Mum's grouchiness. It wasn't *fair*. Hey, wasn't *I* the one under pressure, doing exams, dealing with puberty?

I reckon I was the only girl in my year to learn the A to Z of menopause from her father. I died of embarrassment right there, but he gave me chapter and verse. Forget the vague 'women's troubles' crap that my girlfriends got fobbed off with. I had to learn what a euphemism was from a dictionary.

I was stubborn enough, mind you, to continue muttering under my breath from the safety of my huddle on the couch about it *still* not being *fair*, as the blush receded. That got a reaction; I should have known better. Dad had better hearing than a dog till the day he died.

*-Fair? Who ever told you life was fair? I certainly didn't.*

And going to the bookshelf, frisbeed something in my direction with an unfamiliar impatience. It landed next to me with quite a thud, for a slim book.

*-Maybe it's time you read this again. You play the hand you're dealt, Claire.*

I was only eight when he first lent me his copy of 'To Kill a Mockingbird'. What, you think eight was a bit young for that? Hey, I'm the type who can't sit at the breakfast table without reading the cereal packet from cover to cover. I read like I breathe, always have, I can do it standing on my head. (Literally. Lyndal Stoner would be horrified to know how many sensitive documents I've accessed from her desk, just through the ability

to read upside down whilst talking about something else.) No, Harper Lee was a bracing lungful of oxygen for this particular eight-year-old. Age isn't the greatest guide to where a child's at.

Just ask me. I know.

Anyway, reading it again at fourteen was an eye-opener. Oh, not about fairness, I got the message the first time, he only had to *mention* the book to make his point; but at fourteen it struck me that my dad hadn't exactly gleaned his parenting methods from Dr Spock. Which wasn't quite the *outcome* Dad was looking for, but there you go.

Of course I still had the odd moment of rebellion; Dad's Atticus impersonations didn't dissuade me from a bit of lateral thinking from time to time. The 'discreet omission of carefully selected facts' got a run or two in my late teens. You know, *what they don't know won't hurt them*. But I think Dad could smell when I was holding something back- he knew me too well. I always got sprung. And he always had a crushing come-back if I wanted to debate the point.

*-You can lie just by saying nothing, Claire.*

*-So we're a Buddhist when it suits, huh?* I'd think sulkily. Having the sense to keep my mouth shut. When in a hole, stop digging.

And so I grew up 100% vertical, the sort of person who always tells it like it is, straight out, up front. I was no politician. Just as well I never craved a promotions position at Morton; I could never have told enough flattering lies or shut my eyes and mouth for long enough to slide upwards in the hierarchy.

Not any more. This is the story of how all that got wiped out. Are you listening, Mr Darwin? It didn't take generations- thirty days was all it took to change this leopard's

spots. Because, you see, if I hadn't had such blind faith in the power of truth, Caroline Field might be alive today.

Maybe it'd have been different if Dad had still been here. God, it *can't* be six years. When he died it was like someone pulled the plug, little lights went out everywhere, I couldn't see where I was going any more.

Oh, stop it. I'm dripping tears on the keyboard and I've hardly started. I can just see the headlines- *woman electrocuted at laptop*. There'd be some sort of justice in that.

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Typical. I'd just written that and there was a quiet knock at my door: Fraser bearing tea and sympathy. I did manage to tell him I was starting this today. He gave it half an hour before he figured I'd have cracked up.

Tina reckons Fraser is karma in action; she doesn't know that what I did for her was nothing, that I'm still playing catch-ups. Maybe when I've written it all down, once she's read it all, she'll understand that I've got a way to go before the gods start sending me gifts.

Who knows, maybe one day I'll work out the rules- when it's safe to tell the truth, when it's not. Maybe then I might feel like I deserve Fraser. Till then, it's all another mystery to me.

Oh, god. That girl will be the death of me yet. She's just started practising 'Cain't Help Lovin' Dat Man', knowing full well it'll give me the giggles. Nothing wrong with her timing, either. Clown.

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## 2. Second Subject

I'm flying through the first lesson of the rest of my life with a trapeze artist's scorn for the net when she catches my eye. She's the one not laughing. Apparently my Superman routine is singularly unfunny from the back right-hand corner of Room 407.

Sonata Form, bang at the front of the Year 9 programme, in the mind-melting humidity of February. Brilliant planning, Mrs Gardner. Get them to parrot it back to you like the frigging two-times-table every lesson for a month, and by March 1st three-quarters of them will still have no idea and not give a shit anyway. Not to mention that you've lost their interest for the year, and getting it back's about as easy as knitting worms.

But Mrs Gardner's not on Year 9 this time round, even if she did bequeath me the divine legacy of her crappy programming. So I dump her dodgy methodology notes in the circular file and *do it my way* (sorry, Frank). Over nearly fifteen years I've perfected this performance- it's my favourite party piece. I print *SONATA ALLEGRO FORM* on the whiteboard, *sloooooow-ly*, in careful capitals. Ignore a few quiet groans behind me. Then I come over all absentminded and quietly leave the room. Wait for the murmuring to start.

*Slam* back through the door and attack the piano like Liberace on speed. Forget the Ritalin. A barrage of *fortissimo* chords crashes through their attention deficit like a brick.

*Dump diddle-ump diddle-ump, DAH-DAH!*

I scrawl *Introduction!* on the board. Every eye is on me, trying to work out if I've lost the plot or if they're meant to let themselves laugh.

Mrs Goodwin becomes Mr Squiggle at the whiteboard. *First Subject* as Superman, cape flying as he zooms across the board. A few beery, macho bars filched from the telly boom out of the piano; Superman feels like a Tooheys. Pause and pose,

muscles flexed. They collapse into giggles, suddenly enjoying being force-fed the most boring topic in the syllabus.

All but one. The eyes are fixed on the cartoon strip unfolding on the board; a pen clicks, clicks, clicks under her thumb.

The top floor rooms were always stifling, and I'm not really surprised to find nothing's changed in my absence. The heat rising from the gym below is lusciously tinged with the overripe odour of sweaty sandshoes from the Year 9 locker room, but to close the door would mean death by asphyxiation. There's an aleatoric symphony of muffled cries and cross-rhythm footfalls spicing up the atmosphere, too, just *begging* my kids to join the final-period riot; I'm relieved when the PE teacher's whistle slices through the noise like a conductor's baton, blessing us with sudden silence.

But I don't miss a beat; there've been plenty of hot afternoons, plenty of tough nuts to crack in the back row over the years. On the whiteboard, Superman locks up his Southside flat with a big cartoon key. He's off to date Lois Lane.

*Bridge passage. She's a Northside girl.*

Two of the bright-eyed ones are picking up the gags early- I spot the scholarship winner just by her first-past-the-post reactions. A few more strokes of the pen and Superman's flying over the distinctive criss-crosses of the Carter's Point Bridge, and seventeen of the eighteen who didn't get it the first time groan in unison.

Sixteen more bars at the piano, something so boring I can do it with one hand and stifle a yawn with the other, pretend to fall asleep on top of the upright, then shake my head, rub my eyes, segue into modulating arpeggios.

Stop. Rummage in my pockets.

A new cartoon key appears in Superman's hand.

*Hey, he's gotta have a different key to get in... more groans.*

Here's Lois, a sooky theme nicked from a daytime soap; she's a fluffy cardboard-cutout, nauseatingly feminine. *Second Subject.*

I'm Hoffnung in heels at the piano, making the Lois theme flirt outrageously with a few saucy flicks of my fingers. The girls collapse into more giggles. *Here's her dog Codetta*, with a little docked tail; *presto* scales prance up the keyboard. More laughter.

It's too hot to be racing round the room like this, from board to piano and back, up and down the aisles, but it's the first time they've come across me and I'm keeping on their case, making eye contact, flicking the odd 'Dolly' closed as I pass. *You don't need that, I'm not here to bore you.* I'm high. I know it works. I'm not even sweating.

Black eyebrows pinch into a frown in the back corner. Arms folded. She's clearly the class eccentric; despite the heat, she's wearing a school sweater at least two sizes too big for her, the cuffs frayed, her thumbs poking out of two purpose-built rips. *I bet that goes down well with the prefects*, I muse.

Mozart's 40th on the CD player. I gesture to the cartoon on the board and act out the parts as the Exposition plays, miming an *agitato* posturing Superman, a zooming flight over the bridge, a simpering *cantabile* Lois, a bouncing tail-wagging *codetta*. Toss on a bit of Haydn and do the act again. Watch the lights go on around the room.

*Get it? Welcome to musical fashion, circa 1750AD.*

As I repeat the game with Beethoven, a few of the bright sparks are anticipating, joining in the poses; some sort of vague comprehension dawns in the eyes of a dull-

looking girl in the front row, and she grins widely enough to give the plain face some animation.

*This is the Exposition, girls, I say with a completely innocent face; the subjects expose themselves to the listeners, and next comes an interesting Development.* Slipping Mozart back in the machine.

Dirty chuckles from a bright-eyed redhead; a few others look strangely at her, then get it and collapse into laughter again. Never fails- there's always one who picks it up. And now they'll remember. If they laugh, they'll remember; it's my First Commandment of teaching.

Meanwhile, from the back row dark eyes flash at me. Oh yes, Madam's listening all right. *Go on, then; win me over. We are not amused.* I've seen them stare into space with their eyes glazing over, but this stony attention is weird. I feel like a child encountering a new creepy crawly. *Get a stick and poke it.*

I hit the pause button, aborting Mozart as I dance back behind my desk, take a surreptitious glance at the class list, stop dead, raise an eyebrow at her.

*Catch this one early, I think. Looks like trouble.*

"Not taken with the Superman analogy, Tina?" I give her the 5000-watt smile.

She's momentarily startled. The frown unfolds for a moment in surprise. I'm not quite as much of a fool as she's thought.

But Tina's not the only one bemused by this new party trick; before she can open her mouth to reply, Freckles up the front blurts out, "How did you know her name?"

I turn the smile on her.

"Trade secret, Julia."

Julia grins again; I'm almost certainly the only teacher today to have learnt *her* name. You get the best reactions from the invisible ones. I've been patrolling the room at high speed for thirty minutes since I called out the class list at the start, learning names from pencil cases and books and rulers. There are tiny annotations in pencil all over my roll. *Camilla PARKER: red hair, cheeky. Or, Leah MORRISON: Miss Trendy, thinks she's Winona Ryder. Next to Julia- currant bun.*

*Just as well SHE can't read upside down, I think, momentarily guilty.*

But too many of them walk into my room with their own pencilled notes. *Music TEACHER: she who can, does. Brace for mediocrity.*

And knowing that, I enjoy firmly upturning their preconceptions.

The class descends into a hubbub of competing cries. Tina's answer, if there was one, is lost in the melee, and I give her an amused shrug as I swallow the red herring and attend to the loudest voice.

"Who am I, then?"

"See that floppy thing on the end of your arm, Camilla? It's called a *hand*. You put it up when you want my attention."

More giggles. Camilla's hand shoots skywards.

"Yes? You rang?"

"Okay then, what's *her* name?" Choosing another mouse in the front corner.

"And it's Milly, with a 'y'."

"Pardon me for breathing, and I also have a name, Milly, so it would be polite of you to use it. That would be Lin over there, I believe, and that's Lin with an 'i'. What is this, twenty questions or something? How about we save time?"

I go around the room naming them. This is all good. I hesitate over a pair of blonde ponytailed look-alikes sitting side by side, narrow my eyes and take a stab at it.

"Rebecca? Amanda? Or possibly even Becky and Mandy." Giggles and nods.

Lucky guess. I wipe my brow in mock relief, *whew*; the laughter suggests that I wouldn't have been the first to mix them up.

The change in atmosphere has killed my first-day nerves at last. Formality is the first casualty of my teaching style. It's a relief for us all to become 21 assorted human beings stuck in a room together, and as long as I don't make the mistake of boring them through laziness rather than acknowledged necessity, we'll get on fine. I perch with legs crossed on the front desk, encouraging them to talk about themselves and each other. The kids here are tuned in to each other's talents- music at Morton's something to compete over rather than cringe about, and I'll learn stuff this way that would take weeks to trickle through otherwise.

*Leah's got a SICK voice*, shouts Milly, forgetting the hand yet again, and the rest chorus agreement amidst giggles as I shake my head at her and send up a mock prayer to the ceiling; *so has Georgie*, interjects Liana- a little petulantly, I believe- and a few of the others turn to stare at her indifferently, while Winona's expressive eyes roll towards the ceiling as she pokes two fingers down her throat in a mock-vomit. Interesting. Tanya, nudged by one of the blondes, raises her hand when I ask who's the Music Scholar, then whacks Mandy over the head with a grin, *tell the world why don't you!*

*She's doing 8th Grade, miss.* A reverent confidence from Julia.

Becky immediately dubs Lin in as the Open Scholar, producing a rosy blush on the bland face and a hissed *shhhh!*. All in good fun. It gives me a buzz to get this lot bouncing. I need them to shed their adolescent indifference at my door.

Not worth reining them in for the last few minutes- much more useful just to let them be themselves for a while. I watch Winona Ryder subtly stir up a heated discussion about the iniquities of the school awards system, note who joins the debate, who seeks my opinion before expressing their own. Who just sits back and lets it happen. Who tunes out.

And who's texting under the desk.

"Liana, I have a funny feeling that the contents of that message wouldn't rate as an emergency."

Liana jumps guiltily, fully expecting the usual confiscation of the mobile.

"Text Georgie to put hers away and then you do the same, please."

General hilarity; Georgie's hand shoots out from under the desk as if her phone's bitten her. The look she gives me leaves no doubt as to her opinion of that trick.

By the time the bell rings I'm feeling like maybe this is going to work after all. I certainly haven't lost my touch over the last two years, anyway. Superman's bitten the dust, but there's always next lesson, when maybe it won't be so bloody hot.

They shuffle out the door, some remembering the compulsory 'thank you for the lesson' as they go and managing to sound like they mean it. Hearing them, Julia stops dead in the doorway and belatedly turns to me, blinking like an unearthed mole as the traffic concertinas behind her.

"Thanks miss, that was really good. My piano teacher tried to explain that sonatra stuff to me last year but I just didn't get it."

The smile seems convinced that all that's changed. *For at least five minutes*, I think cynically, rejecting the cruel idea of asking if that would be *Frank* Sonatra. Aloud, I just say, "That's pretty normal, Julia- even the kids who can recite the form perfectly don't necessarily understand it, you know. Go on, get to roll call now," and return the smile.

Some talk to each other, occasionally pointedly within my earshot.

"That was cool, we did nothing all lesson."

*Mmm, you'd be surprised, Georgie. Smartarse. Have to watch that one.*

Winona gives me a cheery wave; "See ya, Mrs G."

Hell's bells, she's known me all of an hour and already I'm tagged. A good sign.

Tina's the last to leave, dawdling over something dropped on the floor. Maybe I'll get an answer after all? Maybe not. She tuned out as soon as my eye was off her. She's at that gangly stage, all arms and legs; she drops something else as she strolls up the aisle towards me and has to stop again to retrieve it.

"Tina?"

A flick of the head. The black bob swings off her cheek; *that colour can't be natural*, I think. *Wonder if the prefects have picked up on that yet?* She looks me straight in the eye from under the wispy fringe, and I see that those eyes, which I took for black at a distance, are actually a very dark blue. She's not classically pretty, the nose is too thin and sharp under the broad forehead, but it's not a face to forget with that perfect creamy skin and full, expressive mouth. Her books and folders are hugged to her chest like a security blanket.

“You sucked the plebs right in, but it’s a gross oversimplification.”

*Mmm, straight for the jugular.* She’s right, of course.

“Well, I’m relieved that someone’s got enough nous to have noticed that; but if I teach the exceptions before the 'plebs', as you call them, learn the rules, I’ll have twenty Northside mothers aiming blowtorches down my neck at Parent-Teacher night, wanting to know why I’ve confused their daughters.”

A twitch at the corner of the mouth. It’s a generous mouth, a Mick Jagger, Carly Simon sort of mouth. Not the answer she expected. The twitch becomes a grin.

“Nineteen. Mine would probably be outside calling her solicitor on the mobile.”

“Just a more expensive form of flame-thrower.”

The grin bubbles over into laughter. I follow up my advantage.

“So what makes you so sure it’s an oversimplification, anyway? The template fits most of Mozart, and nearly all of Haydn, and it’s not too hard to stretch it around Beethoven if you make allowances for him being a stirrer; even the Romantics tend to hang their ideas off the same hook, though they’re a bit more devious about it. It *is* useful as a starting point.”

The eyes flash again, but this time enjoying the battle of wits. Or possibly the concept of the musical equivalent of God being labelled a stirrer.

“Brahms E minor cello sonata. First movement. That doesn’t fit. Not at all.”

Oh yes, a worthy competitor indeed. A sneaky shot; perhaps she thought I wouldn’t know the piece. It’s not in the course outline. And if it had been, I would have drowned it in White-Out before you could say 'heartache'. The rest of my life has been

planned minus the teaching of Brahms, certainly not to 14-year-olds, and certainly not the E minor. Caroline Field made sure of that.

The tape starts playing immediately in my head, the melancholy opening notes rising and falling, the piano chords holding their gentle syncopation like a hesitant heartbeat beneath. I see Caroline Field's long fair curls falling over her shoulder as the bow glides back and forth. Adrenaline shoots up the back of my neck. I shiver in the forty degree heat of the corridor.

*On Day One? This is not fair.*

*I told you before, Claire. Life isn't fair.*

Back in your box.

"Ten points, you're absolutely right; it's completely upside down."

My voice remarkably steady, if a little faint. Encouraging.

"Lois-" I clear my throat. "Excuse me. Lois is calling the shots from the start. But like I said, the Romantics only used it as a coathanger anyway. Maybe Brahms was a feminist."

She cocks an eyebrow at me. "Maybe templates suck."

Which is just unexpected enough to turn tension into laughter. I crack up, but in a more acceptable sense, thank Christ. We both know she's not meant to be talking like this; 'suck' is not an acceptable verb within the school lexicon. And the eyebrow is my quirk, and she knows that too. Cheeky bugger.

"You're going to be late for roll call."

"Got forty cents? You could ring someone who cares."

"Hang on, I'll write you a note."

"Don't bother. I'll tell Mrs McCosker my G-string snapped. She goes *such* a nice shade of purple."

Another grin and she's gone, sauntering casually off down the green-carpeted corridor. Round One to Tina. I figure she has about fifty seconds left to get to the Year 9 corridor before she scores a detention.

She's not going to make it.

I stand watching the dust motes floating through the afternoon sunbeams from the skylights overhead, feel the demons force their way to the surface again now Tina's gone. Try to push them down, to get the trembling over before I face the staffroom. And wonder, suddenly angry, if the world is full of ambitious *parasites* trying to teach *children* to play Brahms. Or if I could just have been unlucky enough to strike another of Anton's prodigies on my first tentative step back into my life.

And the green carpet melts away into a green paddock, and I see Caroline Field running in the dusk, hair flying, running away from me into a sunset like Armageddon.

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### 3. Dal Segno

I sit at my desk, pathetically grateful that the staffroom's deserted, and close my eyes. And thank Christ one more time that I don't have to front up anywhere else in this place today. Maybe no-one's saying anything, but they've gone easy on me; I haven't been